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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 000631

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR, NEA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/30/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY'S DEFENSE AGREEMENT AND EXERCISE WITH
SYRIA: ISRAELI REACTION

REF: ANKARA 625

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: Turkey signed a bilateral defense industry cooperation agreement with Syria on April 27 and conducted the first ever bilateral military exercise with Syria from April 27 to 29. The significance of these developments should not be exaggerated. The Turks stressed that the agreement was not intended as a political statement, but as an attempt by the Turkish military to draw the Syrian military toward the West. The MFA also downplayed the bilateral military border exercise, characterizing it as "more sightseeing than a military exercise" and a baby step toward building confidence and cooperation focused on combating smuggling and terrorist threats posed by the PKK. TGS Chief Basbug did not take kindly to the concerns expressed by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, dismissing them bluntly in a high profile April 29 press conference focused mainly on the Ergenekon investigation (reftel). The Israeli Ambassador is calm on this, and the Israeli embassy spokesman dismissed media speculations that Israel may reconsider existing defense contracts with Turkey, including the delivery of Heron UAVs scheduled for this summer. As of April 28, he said there has been no discussions about cancellation of defense contracts and Israel has not altered plans to participate in military exercises hosted by Turkey later this year. Basbug's statement will do nothing to repair already strained political and military relations between Turkey and Israel, but we believe the Turks will avoid steps that will lead to a breakdown in its strategic relationship with Israel. End Summary.

2. (C) Deputy Undersecretary of Defense Major General Beyazit Karatas, under instructions, briefed ODC Chief on April 28 about the bilateral defense industry cooperation agreement Turkey signed with Syria on April 27 on the margins of the International Defense Industry Fair (IDEF) in Istanbul. Karatas stressed that this was a low-level military-to-military cooperation document, not a political statement (Comment: The agreement signed is part of a menu of standard agreements Turkey signs with many countries. According to the MFA, Turkey has signed over sixty such agreements, most of which have not translated to any practical follow through. End Comment). The agreement reflected an attempt by the Turkish military to open communication channels with the Syrian military which, according to Karatas, is seeking an outlet to the West. Karatas emphasized that this agreement is not a reaction to

current tensions in the Turkish-Israeli relationship. He also said that this move should not be interpreted as Turkey drifting to the east, but as an effort to draw Syria toward the West, where Turkey remains firmly rooted. He underscored that the agreement is in all of our best interest.⁸

13. (C) In a related development, the Turkish General Staff (TGS) posted a statement on its website on April 26 announcing the first ever bilateral land forces border exercise⁸ with Syria. The MFA is downplaying the exercise, which took place April 27-29. The MFA's Syria and Lebanon Desk Officer Cayhun Erciyes told us that the goal of the platoon-level exchange was to provide reciprocal briefings on anti-smuggling efforts, improve cooperation against the PKK, a common threat, and build mutual confidence on the border. Calling the exercise "more sightseeing than a military exercise," Erciyes said about twenty Syrian border forces visited Gaziantep on April 27 and again on April 29, and about twenty Turkish troops visited Aleppo on April 28. The agenda included reciprocal briefings on anti-smuggling efforts, sightseeing, and a volleyball competition. Both the MFA and the Israeli embassy in Ankara confirmed that the Government of Israel has not raised this exercise formally with the GOT, although both noted Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak's statement on April 27 expressing concern about the exercise. During a highly publicized April 29 media conference focused on the ongoing Ergenekon investigation (reftel), Chief of the Turkish General Staff GEN Ilker Basbug gave a blunt reply when asked about Barak's comments. Basbug acknowledged that the exercise was a first for Turkey and Syria, characterized it as a "small exchange between border units," but then said, "We are not interested in the

reactions of Israel. This is an exercise with Syria. This is something between us and Syria."

14. (C) In fact, Turkey has since 1921 (when Syria was a French protectorate) a military relationship involving the permanent rotation of an honor guard unit to the tomb of Suleyman Shah, the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, in northern Syria.

15. (C) Israeli Ambassador dismissed the Basbug incident, saying (protect) that it was a dumb comment by Barak that provoked Basbug. While the "good feelings" in the relationship including military have not returned to their pre-Gaza level, in terms of specific military cooperation, he said everything is fine. In line with that, the Israeli embassy spokesman publicly denied media reports that Israel is reconsidering defense contracts with Turkey, including the delivery of Heron UAVs that are scheduled for this summer. As of April 28, he said that there has been no discussion of canceling any defense deals with Turkey. He also confirmed that Israel is pressing ahead with plans to participate in the annual Reliant Mermaid and Anatolian Eagle exercises hosted by Turkey.

16. (C) Comment: The significance of the bilateral military agreement and exercise with Syria should not be overblown: They are small steps consistent with Turkey's broader efforts to draw Syria away from Iran's orbit. Karatas' briefing for our ODC Chief is a sign that the Turkish military is cognizant of the need to assuage both U.S. and Israeli concerns even as it takes these symbolic steps to reach out to the Syrian military. Exceeding the Israeli embassy's expectations, the Turkish General Staff Deputy Chief GEN Igsiz and Deputy PM Cicek represented the military and government respectively at Israel's April 28 National Day reception, a signal that both the government and the military wants to begin the process of mending fences with Israel. Israelis also expect a President Gul visit to take place, albeit later (October) than hoped. Basbug's blunt remarks notwithstanding, we anticipate that the Turks will avoid steps that will lead to a rupture in relations with Tel Aviv. Turkey continues to view Israel as an important source for advanced military technology and recognizes the benefit of maintaining the strategic relationship. End Comment.

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Jeffrey